

Interview

Sebastian Baden in discussion with the Journal for Art Market Studies on institutionalised criticism of “Art Fair Art” and the “aesthetic schism” in art history

JAMS: From your perspective, what is the role of object presentation in today's art market?

SB: For every market, supply is vital, and therefore saleable formats such as paintings, sculptures, editions or video art need to be presented on the art market. There has to be a balance between traditional, familiar products and new types of art that feed the demand for innovation. The latter may transcend genres or boundaries. Ever since Duchamp's readymades characterized the “aesthetic trauma” (Beat Wyss) of modern avant-garde art, the discussion about objects has sought to bolster their importance and their value. Accordingly, conservative real assets are sold at art fairs, in galleries, or at auction, while their future economic and art historical value could still evolve quite differently. Many expensive works without art historical relevance are decorating the rooms of collectors. The art object is like a fetish at the centre of an important bartering transaction involving symbolic and economical capital. When no actual object is on offer, as in performance art, there will be a conceptual document or a certificate, or at least verbal instructions, as can be purchased in Tino Sehgal's art. Research into the art market becomes especially interesting when an attitude of denial is enacted that serves as a branding function in reverse. A paradigmatic work of this type was Yves Klein's *le Vide* in the Iris Clert gallery in 1958. The art of the so-called Institutional Critique followed this example, while in turn confirming the art market's power of definition. Today, the art of denial is even propagated into a trademark of the art market as “Art Fair Art” (Jack Bankowsky/Holger Liebs).

JAMS: To what extent is the reception of art controlled in a commercial space, and what are the objectives and strategies?

SB: The sale of art works is contextual, and as such tied to specific rooms and institutions, primarily the studio and, originally, the auction houses. Since the twentieth century,

galleries and art fairs cover the primary market, but even at the [Venice] Biennale and the *documenta*, art works on view may be sold either during or after the show. As the exhibition of artworks that are not yet part of a collection is nearly always primarily directed towards their sale, presentation has to be perfect. Accordingly, it is once again the institution that sets and legitimizes value. The specific format of the selling exhibition for art in a marquee, as still seen at the FRIEZE fair in London and New York, was established by Gustave Courbet in 1855 at his *Pavillon du Réalisme*. Of course he was also able to build on the concept of the Salon and the attraction of the World Fairs. The art market demands innovative formats that permit a staged discourse around the sale event, thus attracting as many people as possible. Art Basel is the perfect example.

JAMS: What differences do you see in today's commercial presentation of art objects compared to historic selling displays?

SB: There is a painting by Nicolas Antoine Taunay of 1795 depicting the outdoor sale of art on a square in Italy. At the opposite end of this spectrum of that period we find the Salon that controlled exclusive access at the Louvre and set strict categories that continued until after the French Revolution. The "Association of Progressive German Art Dealers" (Verein progressiver deutscher Kunsthändler) adopted a similar approach in 1967, when the Cologne Art Fair was set up with a few selected participants. Even today the art market is directed towards an exclusive, privileged audience, albeit on a globalized scale. However, self-criticism and self-reflection on the subject of making art have become an important driving force in the accompanying event programme of commercial exhibitions. For example, Art Basel's "Salon" discussions feed this demand for debate, and all other art fairs offer comparable activities. Discussions about terms such as post-colonial, gender, race, class should not be overvalued – they are the fig-leaf of a euro-centric, originally European art market that deftly incorporates current academic discourses with view to staking out further claims. They will not make the concept of a market imperialism by the Happy Few either more democratic, or more liberal or fair. But the art system, as Niklas Luhmann refers to it, gains stability through irritations and appropriation. From time to time, the conventional presentation pattern of the White Cube is challenged by alternative stagings such as the installation of the apartment of the imaginary collector "Corrado N" from 1968 in Paris. It was shown by the Helly Nahmad gallery at the Frieze Art Fair / Masters Section in London in 2014. The stage set designer Robin Brown created a highly original design for the stall that included the integration of the 1968 protest movement's nostalgia into the value creation of the art market. The success of a sale depends on provenance, even if it is at times fictional – it is only fakes that prompt an allergic reaction by the market, and justly so.

JAMS: Do you see a connection between the exhibition practices of today's trade and the development of prices?

SB: Even though Paco Barragán calls the twenty-first century the "Art Fair Age", the increasing power of the auction market is undeniable, as Rudolf Zwirner stated in his famous speech in front of the Federal Association of German Galleries at the Munich art

academy [in 2006]. The bidding war at auction generates high prices, but it is no guarantee for consistency. This is where museums and their power of legitimization come back into play, since a museum show establishes value. I note with interest that big and financially well-endowed galleries such as Thaddaeus Ropac or Larry Gagosian now borrow classical works from museums in order to create museum-style exhibitions, surrounding their own secondary market stock with these not-for-sale works. For young galleries that offer the work of contemporary artists, the situation becomes increasingly difficult. They depend on incurring favour with guest curators promoting their own artist lists and acting as agents for sales to private collectors. In turn, these rely on their works being shown by an art association or museum to attract attention and increase in value. In this sense, the Chinese art market is even more volatile, it is more closed-off and achieves higher prices while being restricted to operating only on a national basis.

JAMS: What are the effects on commercial presentation by art forms that transcend boundaries, such as installations, new media, or works that consciously ignore or disguise the borderline between art and surrounding reality?

Works that are unusual, interdisciplinary, or transcend boundaries reaffirm the art system and therefore the art market. They broaden the scope for real asset investments in conventional art media. In *Art of the Deal*, Noah Horowitz gives an informative outline of the production and marketing of video art. Even an artist such as Andrea Fraser, who contributed through her writings and her work to the concept of Institutional Critique, benefits from their critical view of the system. The greatest visible success is currently – and justifiably – generated by the award-winning and much discussed work of Anne Imhof, an art that my research refers to as "institutionalized criticism". The art market thrives on criticality supplied by contemporary art. This generates a dynamic of absorption, a re-appropriation of criticism and of transcending boundaries. It is not accidental that artists are especially good at it who successfully passed through the German academy system. The modern concept of avant-garde has by no means had its day, it is just being reinterpreted.

JAMS: What differences do you perceive between exhibitions of contemporary art in museums and in the trade?

SB: Museums are definitely lagging behind the exhibition industry in galleries, biennales, even in a format such as *Art Unlimited*. A museum is unable to pour as much cash into innovative and experimental projects – and the inherent risk of their failure – as the private art market can. Of course third party financing can generate larger and academically unparalleled theme-based museum exhibitions, but even commissioned works and exhibition co-productions were financed beforehand by venture capital from the commercial art market. This is why, as a curator of a museum collection, I try to see as many artist exhibitions in art associations, galleries and at art fairs as possible. Especially the work by young artists is often shown in exciting presentations, where works in line with

the market are complemented by so-called statement pieces, showing the versatility of their position. Ultimately however, formats such as solo exhibitions in museums will be the touchstone for whether an artist's position prevailed and will remain congruous in the long-term. Of course, such an extensive and comprehensive review of an oeuvre, including loans from private collections, can hardly take place in the trade.

JAMS: Are there commercial exhibitions that you would describe as groundbreaking, in the sense that they not only positioned an artist on the market but also placed him/her within the art historical context in a new or redefined way?

SB: Every gallery exhibition – and even a museum exhibition with for-sale loans – is an attempt at art historical positioning and evaluation. The art system, or the field of art (Pierre Bourdieu's terminology is more appropriate in this context) defines and negotiates artistic and art historical power. The art history of "exhibition artists" (Oskar Bätschmann) can build on the successes of good commercial exhibitions. A case in point is the above-mentioned Gustave Courbet, as is the competitive approach of the Biennale concept, as Venice offered works for sale right from the very beginning. *Documenta* as well, certainly, and then there are subversive pieces of "action" art by Joseph Beuys, like *Wir betreten den Kunstmarkt* (We Enter the Art Market) of 1970, a year after he had been made into the most expensive German artist in conjunction with René Block. More recently, there was the auction coup by Damien Hirst in 2008, who demonstrated the artist's position as being in control of his own market. Last not least there was Andy Warhol, whose painting of Campbell soup cans was first shown in 1962 in the Ferus gallery in Los Angeles, even before the curator Walter Hopps became curator at New York's MoMA.

JAMS: What is the effect of an increasing overlap between artistic and curatorial practices, as can be observed recently, on the staging of commercial exhibitions and viewing spaces?

SB: There is actually a notable transformation in the work share of the art market. This not only affects the activities of artists and curators, but also of art historians. In that sense, I am a hybrid model myself, as I first studied as a school teacher for art, then worked in a gallery, became an assistant at an academic institute for art history, did a PhD and now work as a curator. Galleries and art fairs increasingly turn towards curators for their exhibitions, including art historians, while museums and biennales use the creators of art as curatorial staff, probably hoping to give a more diversified impression by way of a re-mix. It really depends on the objective, since academic exhibitions need professional expertise and the hook of academic research. In that sense, artist's curatorial work is less constrained and can structure topical themes in a different, improvising way – while not being held to account by academic methods and source-based research.

Speaking from my own experience, I very much enjoy combining the advantages of all my previous roles in tandem. In my post-doc research and working with the collection, I benefit from this situation. While Walter Grasskamp referred to the common division

between art market art and, supposedly, non-commercial artistic practice as a "denial of economical influences in art" and as an "aesthetic syndrome", I would call it "aesthetic schism". If we really want to look at the art market and art history as separate fields of work, we have not understood the art system. But of course it is perfectly possible to conduct detailed art historical research without taking the art market into account.

JAMS: What are the consequences of the globalization of the art trade for the design of exhibition spaces and the presentation of art? In other words: Is the art fair visitor aware whether he or she is in Basel, Cologne, Dubai or Hong Kong?

The international art market is hegemonic and homogeneous in structure. There are local, regional and national differences, but the effects of globalization are clearly felt. In spite of the variety of offerings and a boundless plethora of art creators and artworks, there are dominant areas. As a very basic example, paintings have the advantage of being flat and unique. Art fairs have to deal with a challenge: on the one hand, they need to offer the same categories, i.e. Modernism, contemporary art, performance, discussions, special projects, design, and on the other hand, cover all types of media, generations, nations and price levels. And as fairs offer basic and comparative market analysis while giving galleries access to new collectors and clients, they are art market magnets with considerable power of definition. Therefore, it is all the more important to pep up the White Cube concept and the art fair stall setting with innovative presentations. International fairs certainly cultivate their regionalisms and keep their local languages on the signage in addition to the ubiquitous lingua franca of English. But galleries often resort to marketing gimmicks in their presentation, for example the Berlin gallery neugerriemschneider, whose stall at Art Basel was bricked in by Rirkrit Tiravanija in 2005. The artist then sprayed the Situationist slogan "Ne travaillez jamais!" on the brick wall – and indeed no worker was ever spotted there during the fair. A constant re-evaluation of values, to use Nietzsche in this context, is a characteristic of criticality and of a commercially profitable institutionalized criticism of the art market.

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